

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 267 632

FL 015 584

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 TITLE Classroom Activities: Oral Proficiency in Action.
 PUB DATE 86
 NOTE 15p.; In: Second Language Acquisition: Preparing for Tomorrow. Selected Papers from the Annual Meeting of the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (Milwaukee, Wisconsin, April 3-5, 1986). For report of conference, see FL 015 577.
 PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)
 -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
 EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
 DESCRIPTORS *Class Activities; *Communicative Competence (Languages); Difficulty Level; Elementary Secondary Education; *French; *German; Guidelines; *Language Proficiency; Second Language Instruction; *Spanish; Textbooks

ABSTRACT

It is important to introduce and facilitate oral activities in the second language classroom with enthusiasm in a climate of mutual support and cooperation. Students should understand that mistakes are inevitable but not fatal, and that each attempt will build greater ease and confidence in using the language for communication. Oral proficiency activities can bring affective and skills-development objectives into harmony. A series of class activities developed in a Nebraska workshop for Spanish, French, and German to coordinate with commonly used textbooks at beginning and intermediate levels include the following: travel agency client interviewing; inquiring about schedules and activities; expressing or inquiring about preferences; finding a roommate; item identification; describing familiar or unfamiliar people; socializing in a group; bragging; justifying a raise in allowance; interviewing and then describing a classmate; telephone conversing; negotiating television viewing; and describing a food fight. Examples of activities designed for use on advanced levels with a thematically organized conversation text include persuading someone to contribute to a charitable institution and buying a car. For each activity, information is provided on the linguistic function, situation, and directions for students. (MSE)

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Classroom Activities: Oral Proficiency in Action

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As language teachers we are at a crossroads, or perhaps better stated, at the threshold of where we are going and what we have yet to achieve. The oral proficiency wave has appeared with energy and excitement and with the potential for reforming and revitalizing the entire scope of foreign language instruction. Indeed, some would say that the revitalization has already happened, although few would argue that the curricular impact has yet hit with the force necessary to convert objectives to reality.

Oral Proficiency—Where Are We?

Exactly where are we in terms of oral proficiency? The answer cannot, by the very nature of the question, be an exact one. For the sake of clarification, however, it may be valuable to attempt a general assessment of where we are in terms of where we have the potential for going.

The profession seems to have arrived at a point of tentative commitment to the proficiency concept. Attempts are underway to communicate with those outside the profession, as well as those within, concerning both direction and process. The attempt to communicate with legislators and educators who come from outside the profession is strategically important, since in some areas policies are being considered or have already been instituted that have a direct impact upon foreign language curriculum and instruction. If proficiency standards are to be set, those involved must have a clear understanding of what oral proficiency is and what it is not. Oral proficiency is not a measure of what students know about language. It is, however, a measure of how they use language in authentic communicative

settings. Oral proficiency acquired in an instructional setting is not necessarily related directly to time invested and it cannot be measured by conventional achievement tests. Instead, assessments should be made of students' ability to understand spoken language and respond appropriately in a given cultural-situational context. Levels of attainment will reflect experience in language use as opposed to years of language study.

Although the oral proficiency message has been carried forward and heard by those on the foreign language teaching front, the battle is not won. Foreign language teachers may be committed philosophically to the concept that we are teaching a skill in addition to knowledge, and we may have acknowledged that the skill is the more important objective in the eyes of our students, but we must still decide how to proceed. Most current textbooks are of very little help in developing oral skills. Texts are grammatically conceived and are not written to develop listening and speaking proficiency as the first priority, despite claims to the contrary. But the profession has not demanded such textbooks.

In the best of all possible worlds, the committed foreign language teacher would write a proficiency-oriented curriculum including oral, reading, and writing skills. The reality is, however, that when the text is inadequate, the average teacher lacks the time and resources to produce the required instructional materials. Help is needed.

Oral Proficiency—What Has Been Done?

Today's emphasis on proficiency is a logical extension of past strategies that have become more clearly focused as a result of the potential of the oral proficiency interview. Foreign language teachers have felt the frustration of having students who were openly disappointed with functional skill-using abilities when traveling abroad or speaking with someone in the target language. Students tell us, "I can recite medieval poetry (or conjugate an irregular verb), but I can't ask where the bathroom is in the target language." In effect we have been unaware of the need to teach for everyday communicative competency, or we have assumed that it would result automatically from knowledge of grammatical structure.

In 1971, recognizing the need to emphasize communication skills in the curriculum, the Department of Education of the State of Nebraska through the Division of Instructional Services published a booklet entitled

Simulations in Foreign Language (4); *Simulations Level 2* (5) followed in 1976. Communication objectives were stated, and simulation topics such as introductions, telephone communications, shopping, and card and letter writing were chosen. The intent was to have students use language in situations not unlike those they would expect to encounter within the context of the target culture. The objectives of *Simulations* generally coincided with those of today's oral proficiency activities, as the examples below illustrate, but they were expressed in the acceptable behavioral terminology of the 1970s.

1. The student will introduce two people, showing them proper recognition and giving a brief statement to identify each, with correct structure and acceptable pronunciation/intonation.
 - a. Mention first the older of the two or the person of higher social rank.
 - b. Give a brief statement to identify the persons being introduced, e.g., occupation, hobby, mutual acquaintances, etc. (4, p. 4).
2. The student will engage in a telephone conversation with a classmate; identify himself or herself, deliver and take a message, and end the conversation with correct structure and acceptable pronunciation/intonation (4, p. 22).
3. The student will "purchase" an item from a store clerk (another student). The simulation will include:
 - a. a greeting
 - b. at least two references concerning the item (e.g., color, size, price, etc.) and
 - c. payment for the items, with correct structure and acceptable pronunciation/intonation (4, p. 26).

In 1977 the Nebraska Department of Education published *Strategies for Communication*, materials developed in a workshop at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (6). The purpose of the publication was to assist classroom teachers in structuring learning situations that encourage the use of language for meaningful interpersonal communication early in language learning. The strategies were intended to bring together skill-getting (drill) and skill-using to help students communicate authentically in the target language. In 1978 *Strategies for Communication, Book II* was published by the Nebraska State Department of Education (7). Many

of the strategies involved students in creating with language. These strategies clearly fulfill the objectives of an oral proficiency oriented curriculum.

Oral Proficiency—Update

In the summer of 1985, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the Nebraska Foreign Language Association, and the Nebraska State Department of Education jointly sponsored a workshop bringing together fifteen language instructors. The objective was to create oral proficiency activities to supplement first level texts in French, Spanish, and German. It was decided to coordinate the activities with the texts used in the greatest number of schools locally. In Spanish the texts supplemented were *Churros y chocolate* (1) and *Spanish for Mastery I* (9); in French, *Son et Sens* (8); and in German, *German Today, One* (2) and *Unsere Freunde* (10). Situations aimed at skill-using were created for each unit and coordinated with the vocabulary and grammar of that unit. The situations were designed and sequenced for functional use of language at Novice and Intermediate proficiency levels. The activities are subsequently being tried, evaluated, and revised by their authors and others for later publication. Representative examples follow:¹

1. "Travel Agency" is designed for use with *Spanish for Mastery I*, Unit 1, Part 5. Paper and pencil are needed. Students work in pairs.

Linguistic functions: Seeking and imparting information.

Situation: You are working in a travel agency. Your job is to fill out the information cards. Ask the client for the following information:

- a. Today's date
- b. Age
- c. Where from (city, state, country)
- d. Date of birth

2. "What Are You Doing after_____?" is designed for *Spanish for Mastery I*, Unit 5, Part 2. Students work in pairs and each needs a printed copy of the situation.

Linguistic function: Seeking and imparting information.

Situation: You and your friend ask each other what you are doing "after" various activities (choosing from the following list) in order to find out something about your new schedules. Be sure that the person answering one question asks the next so that both get a chance to ask and answer a question. What are you doing after_____?

For example:

the baseball game / the dance / Spanish class / lunch / the party

3. "New for Spring" is a situation designed for Unit 3 of *Churros y chocolate*. Pictures or items of clothing are needed. Students work in pairs.

Linguistic function: Expressing or inquiring about preferences.

Situation: You work with another person in a clothing store. The owner has left a stock of pictures of new clothes that he or she ordered for the store. You and your coworker look through them and react to the clothes and color combinations that you see.

4. "Finding Your Double" coordinates with Unit 24 of *Churros y chocolate*. Students need forms for recording information. (Cultural authenticity could be added by discussing how a Hispanic person's schedule might be different.) This activity involves the entire class.

Linguistic function: Seeking and imparting information.

Situation: Your task is to find a college roommate who would be most compatible with you in daily habits. Conflict can then be avoided.

Directions: Students fill out the daily record sheet individually. When finished, everyone mingles in the class, asking in the target language when the others get up, brush their teeth, etc. At the end of the time period, the teacher asks the students for the search results, stating which students' daily habits matched. These

student matches are potential roommates and can be paired for future activities.

5. **"Don't Sit in My Desk"** is designed for use with *Son et Sens*, Unit 3. Students work in pairs and real classroom items are used.

Linguistic function: Referential—item identification.

Situation: It's the beginning of a new quarter and a student is transferred into your class. Because you and the other students have long since established your territory in the classroom and because this new kid is very concrete and needs everything explained to him or her, your teacher has asked you to show the new person just exactly what items in the room (e.g., desk, table, chair) are already claimed and what are his or hers. In pairs, students role-play a new student and a classroom-wise student. Using possessive determiners, they take turns making statements about classroom items (e.g., it is my desk; it is his desk; it is your desk). The teacher may specify the number of statements and/or time limit.

6. **"Who Was That Masked Man/Woman?"** coordinates with *Son et Sens*, Unit 3. Students work in pairs.

Linguistic function: Imparting factual information—describing.

Situation: You have witnessed a serious crime and are the police's only lead to capturing the culprit. Your job, should you choose to accept it, is to describe the criminal in as much detail as possible. The police plan to use your description for an A.P.B. and require specificity and accuracy.

Directions: Students role-play the parts of witness and police detective, each student assuming each role. The police detective asks the witness a series of questions (e.g., What color is her dress? Is he wearing a coat?). (The teacher may require a certain number of questions/answers.) The witness must answer the questions according to his or her "suspect description" (e.g., Her dress is red; He's not wearing a coat.). Sample "persons" to describe for police artists:

- a. He is . . . wearing a jacket / wearing pants / wearing socks / wearing shoes / wearing a shirt / wearing a tie
- b. She is . . . carrying a purse / carrying an umbrella / wearing a dress / wearing hose / wearing a hat / wearing a watch
- c. He is . . . wearing a swimsuit / wearing a cap / wearing a sweater / wearing an earring / wearing gloves / wearing a necklace
- d. She is . . . wearing shorts / wearing a blouse / wearing a ring / wearing a belt / wearing glasses / wearing a scarf.

Note: Colors and other adjectives may be added for more specific descriptions of the persons and clothing (e.g., He's wearing a little purple hat.).

7. "Getting to Know You" coordinates with Unit 4 of *Son et Sens*. Individuals interact within the context of a larger group.

Linguistic function: Socializing—getting acquainted.

Situation: You are attending a dance at the city recreation center. Although you know very few people in attendance, you look marvelous, Darling, and all the handsome guys/beautiful girls are asking you to dance. You want to come off really smooth, so you keep up a steady stream of small talk and find out as much as you can about each partner.

Directions: Students make two circles, one inside the other. Students in the inside circle face out and students on the outside circle face in as the inside circle rotates counterclockwise, giving students the opportunity to have a new partner each time the teacher instructs them to change partners. Persons in the inside circle ask questions and partners in the outside circle respond. Depending on number and size of circles and time, the two circles may switch question/answer roles. French music playing in the background lends a more realistic party atmosphere to the activity.

8. "My Family" represents a less formally structured activity to accompany *Son et Sens*, Unit 12. Students bring family pictures to describe to their French host families.

Linguistic function: Imparting information—describing personal characteristics.

Directions include: Talk about personal characteristics of the family members. Try to capture the essence (key trait) of each person.

9. **"Mine's Better"** is designed for use with *German Today, One*, Unit 13. Students work in pairs and need blank paper and pencil for recording.

Linguistic function: Interpersonal—"one-upmanship."

Directions: Each student chooses an area of the world and pretends that he or she lives there. The pairs then find themselves involved in a bragging contest, taking turns making comparative or superlative statements about their country, its weather, and its people. If desired, students could also bring the contest into the personal realm making statements about their families and themselves. After the session is over, each student writes his or her partner's best five brags.

10. **"Chores"** is designed for use with *German Today, One*, Unit 14.

Linguistic function: Imparting information—justifying.

Directions: Divide the class into pairs. One person takes the role of the teenager asking the parent for a raise in allowance. The other takes the role of a parent who asks the teenager to justify the raise by telling what he or she did around the house this past weekend. The parent jots down the activities using the past participle—e.g., "cooked dinner" (*Abendessen gekocht*). The parent may also help by asking questions such as "Did you mow the lawn?" The object is to see which pair can get the longest list of chores to justify the raise.

11. **"Partner Interview"** coordinates with *Unsere Freunde*, Unit 6. Students work in pairs and take 2–3 minutes to report to class. Students need paper or a 3" x 5" card and pencil.

Linguistic function: Seeking and imparting information; inter-personal—introducing.

Directions: Select partners. Each person has the task of finding out as much as possible about his or her partner in a five-minute block of time, so that he or she is then able to introduce the person interviewed to the class. The class can then ask additional questions in instances where they would like more information or clarification. Each interviewer is to take notes and plan a two- to three-minute introduction to the class of the person interviewed.

12. "Telephone Conversations" is designed for use with *Unsere Freunde*, Unit 6. Students need pairs of cards describing possible telephone conversations.

Linguistic functions: Seeking and imparting information.

Directions: Distribute one set of situation cards to each pair of students. These cards describe a situation in which a phone call is necessary to find out certain information. The students must then conduct a short telephone conversation and answer the question at the bottom of each situation card. As a check, the teacher should collect the situation cards and look to see that the questions have been answered correctly. Selected pairs of students could also present their telephone conversations to the rest of the class.

Situations:

CONVERSATION 1A: Your name is Hanni. You're working on your homework for tomorrow. You've already finished the exercises for Math (they were really hard), but you forgot to write down the English assignment. Your grade in English is borderline, so you can't afford not to do the assignment. You decide to call your friend Max. You ask him what's new and whether he knows what the English assignment is for tomorrow. After he tells you, he asks whether you have the Math assignment done yet, and if the problems are hard. You thank him for the information and say good-bye.

What is your English assignment for tomorrow?

CONVERSATION 1B: Your name is Max. You were just working on the composition that is due for English tomorrow when the phone rings. You answer with an appropriate greeting. It's your friend, Hanni. She asks what's new, and you reply "nothing." It turns out that she's forgotten to write down the assignment for English (again!), so you tell her what it is. You still have to do your Math assignment, and you ask Hanni whether she has worked the problems already. You also want to know whether they are difficult or not. (You're getting really tired of doing homework, and you're hoping they are really easy.) Hanni can't talk too long, so you say "so long" and hang up.

Has Hanni finished the Math assignment yet? Are the problems difficult?

13. "Watching TV" is coordinated with Unit 24 of *Unsere Freunde*. Students work in pairs and need situation cards. Each pair of students will receive a card describing one of three situations having to do with watching TV, and specifying the role to be played.

Linguistic functions: Persuading, forbidding, and/or expressing and inquiring about preferences.

Situations:

- a. An exchange student and his or her host mother discuss viewing interests and habits.
- b. Two siblings want to watch two different shows at the same time.
- c. A parent tells a son/daughter that there will be no TV watching until all homework is finished.

Directions: Distribute cards; give students a minute to think about their roles before beginning the activity. At the end of the activity, call for on-the-spot samples, assign students to present their dialogues to the class the next day, or have students write a paragraph recapping the conversation (in the conversational past tense) as part of a letter to a friend.

14. "Food Fight," a supplement to *Unsere Freunde*, Unit 15, encourages students to retell their versions of an event and reach agreement on the facts of the matter. It may involve the whole class or small groups. No materials are needed.

Linguistic function: Describing past events.

Situation: The worst imaginable food fight has happened in the school cafeteria. A group of rowdy juniors has insulted a group of proud and easily wounded seniors. You were an eyewitness to this incredibly wild event. Tell what you saw and who was involved. Who else saw the fight? What food was thrown? What was done to quell the violence? What happened to the students involved?

After Level One—Then What?

At the upper levels of language learning (third and fourth year), the instructor should be able to exercise considerable latitude in structuring the class. Activities designed for use with advanced levels are based on *Conversations in Spanish: Points of Departure* (3). The text, which is also available in French and German, is organized thematically. Each lesson deals with a specific vocabulary such as the telephone, the library, the pharmacy, the family budget, or the art of selling. The vocabulary lists are easily supplemented and an oral proficiency activity may be created to emphasize a specific linguistic function. Examples follow that illustrate these possibilities.

1. "Funds for the Children's Zoo" is used with the lesson "El zoológico." The activity focuses on persuasion as a linguistic function. Students work in pairs. The children's zoo administrator is trying to convince a representative of a charitable institution to give money for the zoo by telling him or her what the zoo needs. Student One is the zoo administrator and Student Two is the chair of the fund-granting charitable organization. Students are asked to use zoo vocabulary to persuade someone to do something (in this case to give money).

2. **"Buying a car"** is used with the lesson "El automóvil." The linguistic functions are: giving or asking for information, giving or asking for opinion, persuading, clarifying. An automobile salesperson and a prospective customer are discussing the advantages and disadvantages of a particular car on the floor. Student One, the salesperson, points out all the advantages of the car in question. Student Two, the customer, asks specific questions about the car he or she considers purchasing.

These are fairly open activities that are best used when students have had prior experience with situational oral proficiency activities as they presume some linguistic initiative on the part of the student.

Oral Proficiency—How Do We Make It Happen?

Oral proficiency activities can be particularly productive if they are designed to capitalize on the backgrounds and the interests of the learners. The instructor should make an attempt to tailor oral proficiency activities to the personality of the class as a whole. Some classes truly enjoy activities that allow for creative and humorous expression, while a more matter-of-fact approach seems appropriate for others. What is most important is that the instructional environment offer the student opportunity to create with language in realistic situations.

The activities designed in the 1985 workshop provide a wide range of topics, situations, and instances of authentic language use. While some—designated "game" or "student-centered guided practice"—more closely resemble skill-getting, the majority require creative use of language in a simulated context. A few are structured as "real communication." An example would include any activity designed for students (and teachers) to learn more about one another or to express their personal ideas, beliefs, and opinions (see 11 above, "Partner Interview," for example). Additionally, teachers should be sensitive to serendipitous opportunities for real communication and capitalize on them.

The following specific techniques are suggested to facilitate implementation of the activities:

1. In the large group, provide preliminary warmup, review of vocabulary/structure required for the activity, or other preparatory activity.

2. Make the general situation visible to students by writing it on the chalkboard beforehand, using a transparency, or providing a handout.
3. Model the activity (assisted by a student, hand puppets, stick figures, visual aids, etc.) as needed.
4. Answer questions.
5. Give grouping instructions and hand out situation cards or other materials to be used.
6. Move persons or furniture if necessary. (Prior organization or rearrangement of desks is preferable.)
7. Circulate and assist (or simply listen) as students carry out the activity. Do not correct or otherwise disrupt or distract student efforts.
8. Use a prearranged signal to end the activity and regain the entire class's attention.
9. Call for student feedback, sample student achievement of the objective (accomplishment of task), collect papers, or otherwise provide closure.
10. If the activity was graded or used as an assessment of student progress, provide appropriate feedback to students.

Conclusion

It is important to introduce and facilitate oral activities with enthusiasm in a climate of mutual support and spirit of cooperation. Students should understand that mistakes are inevitable but not fatal, and that each attempt will build greater ease and confidence in using the language for communication. Oral proficiency activities may well provide the means to bring affective and skills-development objectives into closer harmony and, therefore, closer to the professional vision of "where we hope to be" at the end of the next decade.

Notes

1. Oral Proficiency Curriculum Design, 1985: Sidney L. Hahn, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Director; Melvin Nielsen, Nebraska Department of Education; Rosalie Boehmer, Lincoln; Mary Renee Chi, Millard; Marilyn Gordon, Fremont; Cecelia Hahn, Lincoln; William Hammelmann, Lincoln; Elizabeth Hoffman, Omaha; Sandra Hoffman, Millard; Joyce Michaelis, Nebraska Wes-

leyan University-Lincoln; Sara Pankonin, Grand Island; Duveen Penner, Wilber; Fred Scheclert, Lincoln; Tamara Stassen, Syracuse; Molly Tooley, Lincoln; Marie Trayer, Millard; Linda Susan Webster, Lincoln.

2. Authors of activities in the order cited: "Travel Agency" and "What Are You Doing after _____?" Rosalie Boehmer, Marilyn Gordon, Joyce Michaelis, and Sara Pankonin; "New for Spring," Sandra Hoffman; "Finding Your Double," Marie Trayer; "Don't Sit in My Desk," "Who Was That Masked Man: Woman?" and "Getting to Know You," Linda Susan Webster and Cecilia Hahn; "My Family," Molly Tooley; "Mine's Better" and "Chores," Mary Renee Chi; "Partner Interview," William Hammelmann; "Telephone Conversation" and "Watching TV," Duveen Penner; "Food Fight," Fred Scheclert; Tamara Stassen and Elizabeth Hoffman; "Funds for the Children's Zoo" and "Buying a Car," Joyce Michaelis.

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10. *Unsere Freunde*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.